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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA UPDATE FOLLOWING BIRD DEATHS IN MONGOLIA

REF: 07 ULAANBAATAR 233

1. (U) SUMMARY. Tissue samples from dead wild birds in northern and western Mongolia have tested negative for the H5 strain of Avian Influenza (AI). Initial testing following a suspicious bird die-off yielded a suspect sample, but further testing by the Mongolian State Central Veterinary Laboratory proved all samples negative for Influenza A and sub-types H5, H7, and H9. The Wildlife Conservation Society is also sending a set of samples to the University of California-Davis for analysis in October, but since Mongolia is considered to have good capacity for testing samples for Type A, and H5, H7 and H9, there are no additional plans to forward the samples to a reference laboratory. Post's AI Working Group determined that existing tripwires have not been met, but has taken initial steps to prepare for potential future outbreaks. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) All tissue samples from seven dead, wild birds found in the northern and western aimags of Hovsgol and Arhangai have tested negative for the H5 strain of Avian Influenza (AI), according to Mongolia's State Central Veterinary Laboratory (SCVL), the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and the UN Food and Agricultural Organization.

3. (U) WCS first reported a suspicious bird die-off to Post on August 8, citing four dead whooper swans and one black-headed gull found on the shore of Erhel Nuur (lake) in Hovsgol aimag. WCS collected samples from the only two birds (a swan and the gull) which were in suitable condition for sampling. A rapid test on the lung and pancreas of the swan suggested that the swan was infected with the Influenza A virus at the time of death. This was not surprising to the professional field team, since at this time of year up to ten percent of birds have low pathogenic strains of the virus, but the site of the infection in the pancreas raised concerns that the strain could be the more highly pathogenic H5N1 strain. WCS submitted a sample set to the SCVL for analysis and in addition will send a set of samples to the University of California-Davis for analysis in October. The SCVL has now completed all analyses and all samples were negative for Influenza A and H5, H7, and H9 subtypes.

4. (U) On August 11 Government staff reported six dead swans at Ugii Nuur in Arhangai aimag. Samples from five birds were collected and sent to the SCVL. A rapid test for one gave a suspect positive result. The SCVL has now completed all analyses and all samples were negative for Influenza A and H5, H7, and H9 subtypes. Indications from the field, in fact, were that two of these birds had been shot.

15. (U) SCVL has no current plans to forward the samples to a reference laboratory, since the results are negative for Type A and H5, H7, and H9 subtypes. SCVL will continue to try to isolate the virus, but they do not expect them to be positive for H5. Should any Type A virus be found, samples would then be sent for further testing at the regional reference laboratory in Hokkaido, Japan. The SCVL is considered to have good capacity for testing samples for Type A and H5, H7, and H9. Mongolia does not currently have the capacity, however, for definitive and reliable testing for N1, the highly pathogenic form of the virus. Rapid tests for N1, while a useful tool, have not been extensively tested in wild birds and in these cases appear to have returned false positive results.

16. (U) Technical field crews from the government and WCS continue to look for incidences of suspicious bird mortality, especially among migratory water birds found around the many large lakes and wetlands in western and northern Mongolia. To date, however, no exceptional and suspicious bird die-offs have been identified in any other field-surveyed locations.

17. (U) In response to these reports, Post immediately convened its Avian Influenza Working Group to assess the situation and determine what course of action, if any, was called needed. The Working Group determined that the Embassy's AI Tripwire 1 (see ref) had not been met, since there has so far been no evidence of bird-to-bird transmission of AI reaching "epidemic levels."

18. (U) Post technical advisers will consider Post's AI Tripwire 1 met if and when both a die off of dozens of birds occurs in a single location, and those birds test positive for the H5 strain of the virus.

19. (U) The Working Group also identified follow-up actions for Post, including the advance preparation of a Warden Notice on AI that can be quickly readied for release if necessary and the identification of specific actions to be taken if bird-to-bird transmission of epidemic proportions occurs either in Mongolia, or in China, Kazakhstan, Russia, or South Korea.

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